



TWO ORIGINAL SINS: A STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison is an African-American writer. *A Mercy* is her 9th novel, published in 2008. As a Black feminist writer, she exposes the struggles and suffering faced by black women during the period of slavery. Morrison's writings also spectacles the double oppressions faced by black women through gender and race. In her novel, *A Mercy*, the protagonist Florens is a black slave who has been rejected by her mother and even by the black man whom she loves and finally, she realizes her own identity. The novel also exhibits the sufferings of other slaves from different races, who work with Florence under a white master, named Jacob. This paper focuses on the plights of black women and the sins committed by the Europeans which resulted in the exploitation of the colonized land through their colonization power.

Keywords: Slavery, Black feminism, Double oppression, Exploitation, Marginalization, Postcolonial feminism

Tony Morrison is the first Black female writer who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Tony Morrison herself has undergone the sufferings of being a

black female in her early stages of life. In an interview, she explained about an incident during her school days where she was bullied by a boy: a little Italian boy called

me an Ethiopian. Hee hee, hee, you Ethiopian, and you' I went home and said to my mother, 'What is that? And she said, it's a country in Africa'. And it was sort of like, what? He obviously thought it was a great insult". She also further states that "I want to feel what I want to feel. Even if it's not happiness" (Brookes).

As a Black feminist, Tony Morrison profoundly sets the technique of 'writing back'. She wants to unveil the exact surroundings and situations of the slavery period in all her novels. Her ninth novel, *A Mercy*, takes the readers back to the period of the 1690's. In which she gives voices to the voiceless persons. She wants to talk back to the cruel situations faced by the colonized people. In all her novels, black women are the narrators. By this, she exhibits her own experience of 'blackness'. Black feminism and Black feminist groups focus on the development of black women. Race, gender, oppression, and sexism are intertwined. As the *Combahee River Collective*, a Black feminist group, explained in 1977:

It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to

the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist unlike those of black and White men. (Tandon 60)

As a Black feminist writer, Morrison depicts the oppressed black women in the novel, *A Mercy*. Florens is the main character and narrator of the novel. She is a black girl, who thinks that her mother has no affection towards her and abandons her. She has been sent as a slave when she is eight. Throughout the novel, she inhabits the feeling of abandonment, which she experiences after being rejected by her mother and by the blacksmith, whom she loves. Lina is a Native American, only she is alive whereas all other persons in her tribe are dead due to plague. She has been displayed as an advertising product by the Presbyterians, who once cared for her. The advertisement of Lina has been displayed as a, "Hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie" (*A Mercy* 49). Sorrow is the one, who has been treated merely as an animal. At one point, Lina thinks of her as a bit of bad luck. Even she is prohibited from entering the house and Lina "scrubbed the girl down twice before letting her in the house" (Morrison 109). She, whenever goes near Lina and Florens, Lina

suddenly says, “Scat, or send her on some task that needed doing immediately” (*A Mercy* 112). Morrison also discloses the situations of white women labours in the novel. Florens’ mother is an African woman, who encounters all the terrific situations as a slave under D’Ortega. “Beale further points out the unique horrors Black women have to endure” (Tandon 61). Morrison, thus, incorporates the pity plights of women in common.

Slavery is the system that oppresses the colonized people. But black females are considered merely as objects and not as living beings. Their family structures are exploited and have no connections with their family members, whether it may be their children or their husbands. Though there are male slaves, it is the black females as slaves face the double oppression through gender and race. They are stopped from child-bearing and if it so, the masters of the slaves will put their children for sale. These slaves are restricted from getting an education because if they do so, all the black slaves will gain knowledge more than their masters and it may cause a great danger to the dominated people. In Morrison’s *Beloved*, the protagonist kills her children because she doesn’t want her children to be dominated

by others and she thinks that, instead of going into slavery, it is better to be killed by ourselves.

In *A Mercy*, there are two male indentured slaves, Willard and Scully, where Willard has to work as per the bond and his term as slave has been increased because he doesn’t work well and Scully has been working as a slave in the place of his mother as she has passed away. “Willard Bond expected to be freed at age twenty-one. But three years were added onto his term for infractions” (Morrison 131). Other than Willard and Scully, there is - one Native American, one mixed race, and one literate slave. In recent years, there has been no slavery system but still, there exists racial discrimination. A recent interview with a black woman reveals that “I was given opportunities to stay at the White House but I didn’t because I felt like people were very judgemental of my race and gender, and everything. My ideas weren’t getting traction that I feel like others from white guys were” (Cheeks).

Post-colonialism and Feminism are bounded by race, gender, and oppression. These two parallel things can be interlinked with each other. Both males and females suffer from this oppression and they cannot

emerge out of this suppression. “It is only in the last decade or so, however, that these two parallel projects have finally come together in what is, at best, a very volatile and tenuous partnership” (Gandhi 83). Postcolonialism and feminism also deal with the otherness, which is marginalized. The females are the one, who faces oppression through ways, gender as well as race. The difficulties they face can bring them out with much strength and through which they get their identity. “Both bodies of thought have concerned themselves with the study and defense of marginalised ‘Otherness’ within repressive structures of domination and, in so doing, both have followed a remarkably similar theoretical trajectory” (Gandhi 82-83).

Toni Morrison is considered to be a Postcolonial feminist writer. Most of her novels exhibit both the postcolonial aspects and the feministic perspectives. Postcolonial feminists mainly tied with Black feminists because they mainly focused on racism. In *A Mercy*, Florens is on her journey to find the blacksmith because only he can save her Mistress from illness. On her way, Florens enters a large house to stay there which is inhabited by a widow and her daughter. The very next day, the white people question her presence because she is black. They think

that she may be a demon. “One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric. Afric and much more, says another” (Morrison 101).

Toni Morrison portrays America as a pastoral location like Garden of the Eden in *Paradise Lost*. In her novel, *A Mercy*, Morrison depicts America as a place which possesses rich plantations and farming. She gives a vivid picture of the countryside through the picture of forests and fishing. She is also the inheritor of American pastoral tradition.

In this American Eden, there are two original sins, they are- the near extermination of the native population and the importation of slaves from Africa. Now, it inherits an Eden like place and two sins, then how can it be devoid of serpents? They are called Europeans. Even at one instance, in the novel, Lina mentions that ‘Europes’. They are the ‘white-skinned’ people and known as the real serpents in this American Eden. And an example of a poem will disclose the attitude of colonized people towards these ‘white-skinned’ serpents.

There is a poem that was written by an African child. It is about the hardships

the child has faced when it comes to his skin colour. The child belongs to Oglala Lakota Tribe. It was nominated for the Best Poem of 2005. The title of the poem is “Colour”:

When I born, I black;
 When I grow up, I black;
 When I go in sun, I black;
 When I scared, I black;
 When I sick, I black;
 And when I die, I black;
 And you white fellows;
 When you born, you pink,
 When you grow up, you white,
 When you go in sun, you red,
 When you cold, you blue;
 When you scared, you yellow;
 When you sick; you green;
 When you die, you grey;
 And you call me coloured.

(Namboodiri)

These European serpents appear with the gift of smallpox and impose their religious practices. They oppress and exploit the native people, who are living in that place. Lina points out, “We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us” (Morrison 66). At one instance, Florens’ mother puts her in the hands of Jacob instead of her because she thinks Jacob to be a ‘human’. “Not me. Take her. Take my

daughter” (Morrison 28). She doesn’t want her daughter to be exploited in the hands of the serpent called D’Ortega, who is her master. She wants her daughter to be safe and believes that she can lead a free life. But later, Florens who is the protagonist of the novel falls for a free blackman, who is a smith, and helps Jacob to build a new house. But towards the end of the novel, Blacksmith rejects her as she is a slave not because she is a slave but because she is a slave to her own desires. She, however, ends up owning herself.

Jacob Vaark, who is a Dutch orphan, later becomes a landowner and he is a benevolent European. He doesn’t like to choose a slave from D’Ortega but at last, he takes Florens with him. Even though he is kind towards all his slaves- (one Native American, one African, one a bit mongrelized, and two male indentures) he earns much money only through the hard work of his slaves. Most of the wealth, he derives from the sugar plantation in Caribbean, where he does not want to meet the slaves in person. “Trading and traveling fill his pockets” (Morrison 42). The magnificent house which he builds from this money gives him no good. It costs the lives of fifty trees, which Lina says, “Killing trees in that number, without asking their

permission” (Morrison 42). His own daughter, Patrician dies in an accident during the construction and he also dies before finishing the construction work of the house. Thus, knowingly or unknowingly, Jacob exploits the lives of others.

Some of the white settlers like Jacob's wife, Rebbeka, are escapees from hell. Rebbekka, who is a white woman from London, has been imported to America because her parents succumbed to the horrors of London at that period and they cannot manage to take care of their daughter. Rebbeka's choices – “her prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest” (Morrison 71). So, she is imported to marry Jacob, who is unknown to her.

D'Ortega is a Portuguese slave trader. He owns a plantation called “Jublio” and many slaves. He sexually abuses Florens' mother and torments other slaves. He is debited due to his wrong decision in business. This leads him to offer a slave to Jacob and also exploits the lives of slaves. Florens calls him “Senhor” in the novel and her mother sends her with Jacob because there is no protection under this ‘monstrous’ D'Ortega. Florens' mother is from Africa

and she suffers terribly at the hands of the Europeans. She narrates the final part of the novel, in which, she brings out the horrors that she encounters on her way to America. She says, “I think men thrive on insults over cattle, women, water, and crops. Everything heats up and finally the men of their families burn we house and collect those they cannot kill or find for trade” (Morrison 143). At last, She reveals the important reason why she has sent her daughter away which she yearns to explain her daughter, “to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing” (Morrison 145).

Finally, in *A Mercy*, American Eden fills with both the beauties of the places and the terrors of the colonizers. The act of mercy which is not bestowed by God but it should be shared among humans. It is according to this ‘mercy’, America can be considered as a heaven. “In Morrison's latest version of pastoral, it's only mercy or the lack of it that makes the American landscape heaven or hell, and gates of Eden open both ways at once” (Gates). Thus, Toni Morrison gives the vivid picture of America as a pastoral location along with the exploitation of colonizers.

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